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**Online Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) Collaborative Instrument for  
Content Experts, Faculty, and Nontraditional Students**

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**Abstract:** Current and future adult students in nontraditional degree programs have concerns about the future of Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) and the development of related policies and procedures within higher education. This paper documents my involvement in developing a PLA online course that was specifically geared toward the analyses of program development, organizational management, and leadership. The project included four universities in Illinois that collaboratively designed an online course that can be duplicated by other universities and organizations to provide students, faculty, and content experts with quality approaches to PLA and overall PLA program evaluation. The project also included starting a registry of PLA assessors that may be utilized by other PLA providers.

**Problem**

Traditionally, higher education institutions have catered to the graduating high school senior. As a result historically, scores of adult learners, 25 or older, have been left behind or not admitted to colleges and universities. However, students over the age of 25 now exceed those 18-25 year old students enrolling in junior colleges and universities. Many adults who want and need to go to these institutions bring a wealth of knowledge that they have acquired throughout their lives. Nontraditional degree programs across the country have found it difficult to evaluate and expedite Prior Learning Assessments. However, evaluating experiential learning has been key to the success of thousands of adults who have entered universities across the country utilizing the PLA accelerated programs. John Dewey (as cited in Merriam & Cafferella, 1999) stated that “all genuine education comes about through experience” (p. 223). However, the difficulty of finding, retaining, and training content experts and/or faculty members to evaluate experiential prior learning is a persistent problem. Therefore, those individuals who are qualified to receive credits are left out of the economic mainstream because higher education institutions do not have the assessment expertise they need to maintain and retain both students and assessors. On the other hand, the number of adults, 25 and older, returning or going for the first time to colleges and/or universities is increasing.

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, the number of students age 25 and older will grow by nine percent between now and 2010 (Think Like a Restaurant Owner, 2001, p. 6). Additionally, recent United States Census data revealed approximately 3.7 million Illinois residents over age 25 possess high school diplomas but not Bachelor’s degrees. Although the data refer to Illinois, the rest of the United States is also under siege by adults returning to or going for the first time to a college and/or university.

This paper addresses the pressing need to remedy this problem. One method that has been extremely useful is expediting the PLA, which is a method whereby learning accumulated

during the course of an individual student's life experience is converted to university credit toward a college degree (Cross & Valley, 1974; Keeton, 1976; Whitaker, 1989). Over the last thirty years, assessment of prior learning has become a viable way in which adults can request consideration for college credits based on the participatory and experiential knowledge they have acquired outside a traditional education. The award of such academic credits is secured through a portfolio evaluation process. Key criteria in the evaluation of a portfolio for academic credit are the content expert or faculty member's willingness to participate in the process of prior learning assessment, and the student's ability to organize and present verifiable evidence of college-level learning.

If the American government is truly concerned with strengthening economic power through increasing college enrollment and degree completion, adults should be a focus of access and retention efforts in higher education. While the number of adults, attending a college and/or university is growing, and is extremely high in American colleges, universities continue to cater to high school graduates and only half-heartedly address the issues, needs, and concerns of the adult learners who are age 25 and over.

### **Background**

In 1972 the Board of Governors (BOG) higher education degree programs were introduced to Americans. In Illinois five universities collaborated in a consortia arrangement to bring adult programs to urban and rural areas: Chicago State University (CSU), Governors State University (GSU), Western Illinois University (WIU), Eastern Illinois University (EIU), and Northeastern Illinois University (NEIU). At this point in history (Cross & Valley, 1974; Franklin and Thrasher, 1976; Mayhew, 1977), Americans were exhibiting a desire for more education to contribute to their quality of life and to increase the probability of attaining their vocational and higher educational goals. Nationally, thousands of adults have met their vocational and higher educational goals by completing a PLA process (Dr. Kaye Woodard, EIU; Dr. Diane Balin, GSU; Mr. Humberto Rivera, CSU; Janet & Jay, NIEU Nontraditional Degree Programs, personal communications, May 12, 2003). American society and facilitators of adult education embraced the BOG's concept of prior, lifelong, and experiential learning. However, in 1996, the BOG state run programs in Illinois separated because of the termination of the state controlled BOG. Although the consortium was terminated, basic elements of the BOG program remained intact: its philosophy, its commitment to the adult student's needs, and to PLA assessment of experiential learning toward college and/or university credits.

Understanding the responsibilities, goals, and objectives of the adult student and access to higher education, GSU, EIU, CSU, and NEIU partnered with the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) to create an exemplary template for the development of PLA portfolios. The approach is an online course built on the CAEL Standards for PLA, whose approach includes elements from each of the four participating institutions that incorporate PLA portfolios for their adult students.

The adult students that attend CSU, GSU, EIU, and NEIU regularly acquire college and/or university credit through the PLA method. The universities worked together to compile data to confirm the need for an online course, and developed the frame, content, syllabus, and requirements of an online portfolio development course. The directors of the nontraditional degree programs at the universities met face-to-face and virtually to complete the structure of the courses. The consortium partners developed a high level of trust that resulted in a shorter time to

completion of the online course (Colky, Colky, & Young, 2002). This high level of university organizational leadership at the universities, who pooled their resources, resulted in a conviction shared by all four participating institutions and CAEL that in order to significantly increase the number of adult students who complete degree programs, PLA must be made available to every adult student, regardless of physical location. Moreover, according to the program developers, faculty, and content experts at the universities, and in the BOG degree programs had to be educated and/or reeducated on the assessment of portfolio development for Prior Learning Assessment.

### **Prior Learning Assessment (PLA)**

PLA is an evaluation of the knowledge one has gained outside the formal sponsorship of a postsecondary institution before entering a college program. Such learning may have been achieved through work experience, volunteering, community involvement, or independent reading (Mancuso, as cited in Raiskums, 2001). Additionally, PLA is a process of distinguishing and evaluating knowledge gained for academic credit applicable toward a degree. PLA methods are generally of four types: standardized examinations, ‘challenge’ exams, individualized assessments, and evaluations of non-college instructional programs (Flint, 2003; Keeton, 1976; Mayhew, 1977). Colleges and universities have practiced PLA for decades. Advanced Placement (AP) exams have been offered by the College Boards for more than 30 years; “Challenge” exams are institution-based and typically take the form of final exams for specific courses offered within given academic departments. Since 1945 the American Council on Education (ACE) has published guidelines for credit recommendations documenting certain forms of military or corporate training (Flint, 2003). However, individualized assessment is most often accomplished through portfolios of prior learning, based on techniques pioneered by the CAEL (Zucker, Johnson, & Flint, as cited in Flint, 2003).

#### ***The Portfolio for Prior Learning Assessment***

According to Miller (cited in Raiskums, 2001), “The portfolio (a dossier of information, developed by the student under specific guidelines documenting the individual’s past experiences and accomplishments) accommodates many diverse learning styles” (p. 69). Some adult-oriented programs, in fact, view the development of a prior learning portfolio as an important part of an adult’s collegiate learning. A great amount of writing and organization, for example, are involved in completing such a document. Yet, those involved in portfolio programs suggest that there is much more. Students participating in the portfolio development process verbalized changes in self-concept, a new sense of empowerment, and a heightened image as a learner. Empowerment, in particular, is a term frequently used by those involved in the assessment process to describe the key behavioral benefit that adults seem to gain because of the portfolio development process. This feeling of empowerment reflects the abilities of people to manage their lives, to recognize and meet their needs, and to fulfill their potential as creative, responsible, and productive members of society. The portfolio is therefore regarded by those who use it as an important assessment tool for the information it yields about a student and the benefits a student derives from developing a portfolio—a confidence supported by more than two decades of use in numerous colleges and documented in the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) and others (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1977; Keeton, 1976; Smith, 1990; Whitaker, 1989).

Portfolios developed for nontraditional degree programs include the following:

1. Chronological record that lists the student's significant experiences in life.
2. Autobiographical-Goals Paper, which focuses on prior experiences and educational goals.
3. Prior learning requests, which is a document in which the student identifies the specific course of request.

Note: A narrative statement is then developed for each course for which the student believes he or she has a significant knowledge base. These narratives focus on skills and knowledge rather than the experience itself. The evaluator of the learning outcome must determine if the learning is creditable. The following characteristics are shown by the students to prove his or her determination: that the learning implies the student has conceptualized the experiential learning as well as the practical grasp of the knowledge or competency acquired, that the learning be applicable outside the specific context in which it was acquired, and that the learning fall within the domain usually considered for degree credit in higher education as opposed to secondary education.

### ***PLA and Time to Degree***

By developing a portfolio, the adult student is predicted to have a shorter time-to-degree. "Shorter time-to-degree has important financial benefits, both to students (who save money both in direct costs of tuition and opportunity costs of delayed graduation) and to the taxpayers who subsidize higher education both through institutional subsidies and direct student aid" (Flint, 2003, p. 3). The BOG system of granting credits through the PLA process is an excellent opportunity for both the institution and the student.

One of the most important dynamics for the adult student is the amount of time it takes: to complete a degree, to get to school, for enrollment, and to complete distance-learning classes. To realize the ideal of shortened time to graduation is in part a function of the structural aspects of a degree program. Individual skills and confidence cannot guarantee success unless structure is also realigned to the new initiative (Bolman & Deal, 1997). The design of the online course depended upon the alignment of the philosophical aspects, as well as vision and mission of the BOG programs at the four institutions. However, the combined structural and individualized factors clearly would make for a potentially complicated model for the compilation of data. As Flint (2003) asserts, "Regrettably, few if any longitudinal data sets exist that could capture the likely breadth of the influences upon time-to-degree (p. 4). Flint, the current Vice President for Lifelong Learning of CAEL, compiled data in an effort to appraise the impact of PLA and the time it would take to earn a degree in a sample of students who graduated from the four universities. He found that the four universities, CSU, GSU, EIU, and NIEU, shared some common features in their degree programming for adult learners. In order to assess the independent effect of PLA upon graduation, both PLA completers and non-PLA students were studied, controlling for certain effects related to demographics, credit accumulation, academic performance, and age cohorts. All graduates of the BOG program at the four universities during 2000 and 2001 were drawn for the sample. Interestingly, Flint's results showed a negative effect on time-to-degree the Board of Governors program at each institution, which have offered the PLA or portfolio option, for thirty years, while enrollment increased by 10-20 percent (adult students are returning to colleges and/or universities are due to the current economic conditions). This perplexing finding led the consortium to get to the root cause of the bottle-necks and was a key factor leading to the development of the PLA online course and the assessor registry.

### ***PLA Online Course***

It has become increasingly difficult to improve and many times impossible to process prior learning assessment portfolios because of a lack of alignment between the PLA philosophy and institutional philosophies, policies, and procedures. In order to augment this approach and support retention of adult students, the four universities united with CAEL in 2002, to create and pilot an effective, high-quality system of Prior Learning Assessment that included the best elements of each of the four participating institutions thirty years of PLA experience and expertise (John Stoll Dean, personal communication, May 12, 2003).

The course offers adult undergraduate students the opportunity to analyze and reflect upon their rich life experience. They also learn how to extract experiential learning that may be equivalent to college-level credit by creating a portfolio in a prescribed format that identifies assumptions, expectations, and strategies used by faculty and content experts in varying subject disciplines to demonstrate and assess college level learning. A successful student will fulfill course requirements based on their concentration, along with their goal of completing a PLA portfolio for experiential learning credits, critical thinking and university technology learning outcome requirements. In addition, faculty and content experts are educated and reeducated on CAEL Standards for PLA, college and experiential learning in academia.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

As stated earlier in the paper, students at the four institutions frequently demonstrate their learning through this portfolio method. The four institutions worked together to develop the frame, structure, content syllabus, and requirements of the online portfolio development course for adult students. Potential adult students and prospective portfolio assessors are often unclear about assessment of prior learning and the advantages of completing an experiential learning portfolio within nontraditional degree programs, such as the BOG programs. This uncertainty led to the development of the PLA online course, an effective tool to educate and reeducate the pedagogical traditionalist on the advantages of assessing portfolios. According to Schank, Director of the Institute for the Learning Sciences at Northwestern University:

Real-life problems are the key to learning, and PLA validates that learning. The traditional classroom lecture method fails because that is not how adults learn best. Online or virtual courses will be superior to classroom ones when: they have more going on than in classroom settings, they are more fun for students, they have more experts available for students, they provide a lot of simulations and real measures of learning, corporations hire those who do well in them, and universities certify them. (The Online Classroom, 2001, pp. 1-2)

In addition, students are held accountable. If a student needs help or needs to be brought-up-to-speed, he or she can be identified expediently (Colky, Colky, & Young, 2002) in an online course. The online course helps students to analyze, write, assemble, and document prior learning to develop a portfolio, which can be assessed by faculty or a content expert for possible college credit. To enhance the pool of faculty and content experts the four universities are in the process of developing a training module that would include a universal registry of assessors.

Currently, the pool of assessors for PLA is minuscule and there is not a medium to retrieve a list of assessors or content experts for specific disciplines.

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